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Taiwan Acknowledges Presence of U.S. Troops on Outlying Islands

Rare comments came in response to a report that American special forces trainers would be sent to Kinmen, 3 miles off the Chinese coast

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March 19, 2024 9:46 am ET



Taiwanese reserve soldiers taking part in military training on Tuesday. PHOTO: SAM YEH/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

As tensions rise with China, Taiwan's defense minister has hinted that U.S. troops have been training the Taiwanese military on outlying islands that would be on the front lines of a conflict with its neighbor.

The defense minister, Chiu Kuo-cheng, didn't offer details of the U.S. deployment, but the outlying islands include Kinmen, which sits 3 miles east of the Chinese coastal city of Xiamen and more than 100 miles from Taiwan's main island.

"This exchange is for mutual observation, to identify the problems we have, figure out how

to improve and to recognize their strengths so we can learn from them,” Chiu said Thursday in response to questions about U.S. troops on Taiwan’s outlying islands.

His comments marked a rare acknowledgment by Taiwan of activity by American troops on its territory.



Taiwan Defense Minister Chiu Kuo-cheng. PHOTO: ANN WANG/REUTERS

Chiu was responding to questions about a report in Sofrep, an online publication focusing on national security, that asserted U.S. Special Forces trainers would be sent to Kinmen and other outlying islands where Taiwan’s elite forces are based.

Lt. Col. Marty Meiners, a Pentagon spokesman, said he wouldn’t comment on specific operations or training. “Our commitment to Taiwan is rock-solid and contributes to the maintenance of peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait and within the region,” he said.

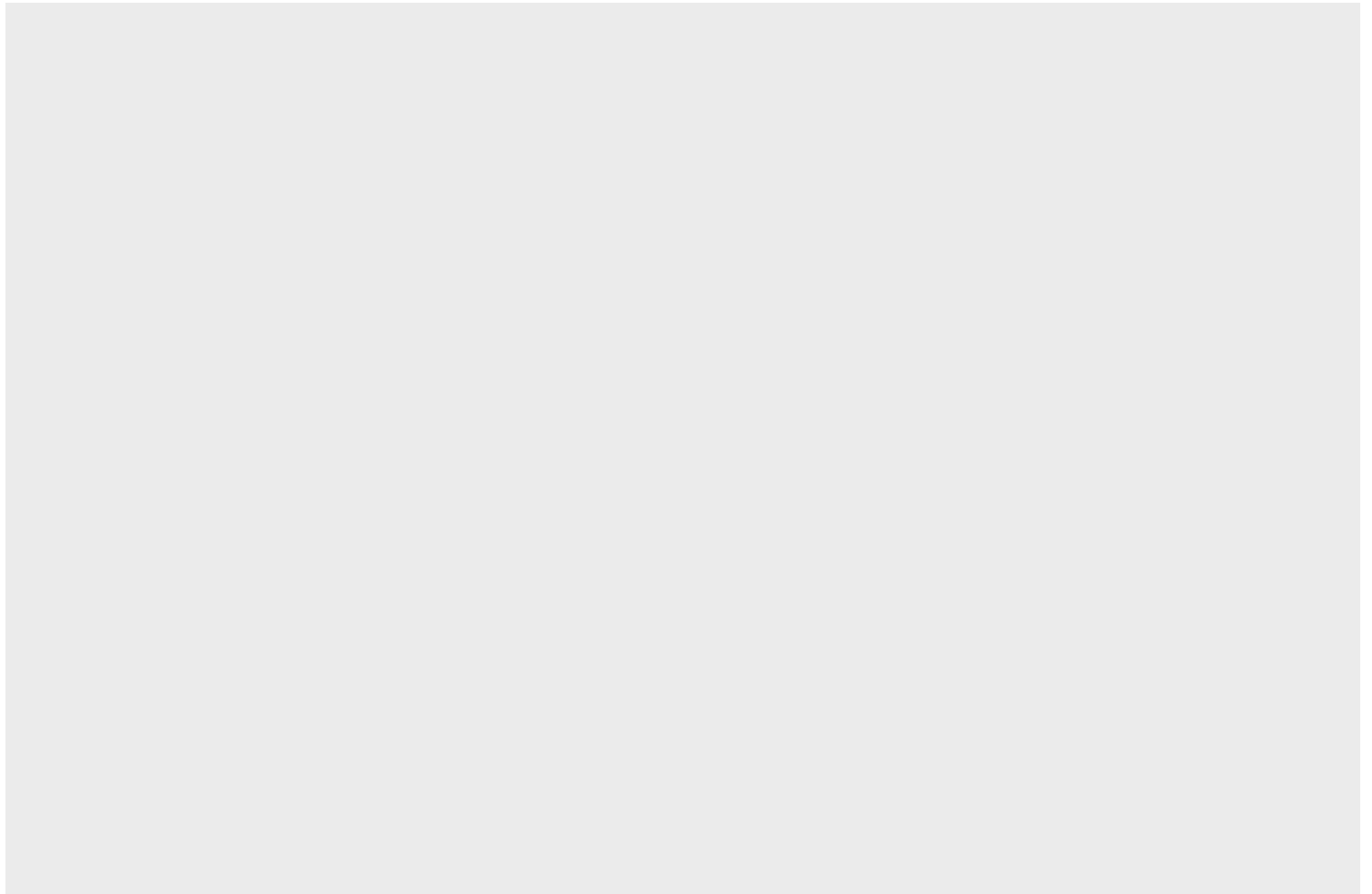
Taiwan needs such exchanges with friendly militaries because its military “may have some blind spots or shortcomings,” Chiu said.

Training by U.S. Special Forces has focused on strengthening Taiwan’s rear security, in particular the prevention of enemy infiltration and sabotage, according to Su Tzu-yun, a research fellow at the Institute for National Defense and Security Research (or INDSR), a military-backed think tank in Taipei. “The collaboration between Washington and Taipei is primarily focused on defense,” he said.

The outlying islands, including Kinmen, are where most of Taiwan's amphibious soldiers, known as the frogmen, are stationed, according to analysts at INDSR.

Kinmen has been the site of a series of testy maritime exchanges between China and Taiwan over the past month following the death of two Chinese fishermen whose boat capsized while being pursued by the Taiwanese coast guard.

A Chinese official called the deaths a "vicious incident," and Beijing said it would step up patrols in the area. Tensions have eased somewhat in recent weeks as the two sides have participated in search-and-rescue operations following other fishing boat accidents, but Taiwanese authorities said Chinese coast guard vessels have continued to enter restricted waters.



Anti-landing barricades on a Taiwanese beach. PHOTO: ANN WANG/REUTERS

The Wall Street Journal first reported in 2021 that a small contingent of U.S. troops had been in Taiwan for at least a year, secretly training the Taiwanese armed forces to defend

against a Chinese military that has been building its capability to capture Taiwan in an armed conflict.

China's Communist Party has never controlled Taiwan but considers the self-ruled island to be part of its territory. Chinese leader Xi Jinping told President Biden during their meeting in November that China and Taiwan would be unified and called on the U.S. to support "peaceful reunification."

During an annual address delivered earlier this month, Chinese Premier Li Qiang repeated warnings directed against U.S. support for Taiwan, saying China will "resolutely oppose separatist activities aimed at 'Taiwan independence' and external interference."

China has sent an increasing number of military ships and aircraft on regular drills near Taiwan, which analysts have described as efforts to train for a potential conflict and test the island's defenses. Beijing launched large-scale drills around Taiwan meant to simulate a potential blockade and fired missiles over the island in 2022 after then-U. S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi visited Taipei.

The U.S. planned to expand its presence of troops in Taiwan to between 100 and 200 last year, up from roughly 30 in 2022, U.S. officials have said. The U.S. and Taiwan have been largely silent on the deployment as they attempt to avoid agitating Beijing.

In the past, Taiwan had sent its special forces officers to train in the U.S., but now the American instructors are coming to Taiwan to train entire companies, according to Shen Ming-shih, acting deputy CEO at INDSR, the think tank. "It makes the training more complete, which I think is very meaningful," Shen said.

Analysts say Kinmen is a logical place for training exercises given some of Taiwan's special forces are based there.

"If you're bringing in a training element, you want to train where the troops are rather than have to take the entire command and move it somewhere else for political expediency," said Drew Thompson, a senior research fellow at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy in Singapore and formerly a Pentagon official responsible for China.



Taiwan's military during the annual Han Kuang military exercises last year. PHOTO: CHIANGYING-YING/ASSOCIATED PRESS

The U.S. doesn't have official diplomatic ties with Taiwan but maintains a robust unofficial presence. The Taiwan Relations Act requires the U.S. to supply the island with weapons and services it needs to defend itself, though the U.S. has traditionally remained vague over whether it would directly aid Taiwan in the event of a war. Biden has repeatedly said the U.S. would defend Taiwan, but U.S. officials have said there is no change to official policy.

The U.S. military regularly sends delegations to observe Taiwan's annual military drills, known as the Han Kuang exercises. Last year, members of the de facto U.S. Embassy in Taiwan appeared alongside senior government and top military officials to watch a series of air raid and disaster-response drills.

Chiu, the defense minister, said Taiwanese defense officials planned to invite their American counterparts to attend this year's drills, which are typically held in July.

Informal military exchanges with the U.S. are common for Taiwan. A delegation from the U.S. Naval War College visited Taipei last week, holding a joint seminar with INDSR to

discuss China's People's Liberation Army and its Navy. National security officials and representatives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs attended the seminar.

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Corrections & Amplifications

Taiwan's defense minister, Chiu Kuo-cheng, didn't name any outlying islands while discussing training being conducted by U.S. troops. An earlier version of this article incorrectly cited Chiu as noting that Kinmen is among the outlying islands. (Corrected on March 19)

Appeared in the March 20, 2024, print edition as 'Taiwan Hints Of U.S. Troops On Islands'.